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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 002008

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [MO](#) [PBTS](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: EMBASSY RABAT VIEWS ON NEXT STEPS

REF: A. RABAT 1776 AND PREVIOUS

[B](#). ALGIERS 1793

[C](#). STATE 73908

[D](#). ALGIERS 866

[E](#). RABAT 278

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) The August 18 release of the remaining 404 Moroccan POWs from Tindouf closed an important humanitarian file in the Western Sahara conflict. In Morocco, the United States gained considerable goodwill from our involvement in the effort; in fact, we believe this is certainly one of the most positive public diplomacy acts -- it seemed to genuinely touch the Moroccan people -- we have facilitated in Morocco in years. Numerous embassy contacts, including other ex-POWs, have told us privately how much they appreciate what the US did, and how they hope this accomplishment heralds movement toward a resolution of the broader political conflict.

[2](#). (C) While the prisoner release has altered the political landscape in a positive way, and does create momentum (despite the sour grapes attitude on the part of the senior Moroccan leadership), it did not appear to diminish the climate of mistrust that prevails between the two sides, and between King Mohammed and President Bouteflika in particular -- which is a fundamental stumbling block to improved Moroccan-Algerian relations. We believe there will be little serious engagement between the two sides without a thawing of the personal relations between the two leaders. Both the Moroccan leadership and numerous contacts have expressed the pessimistic view that real progress in bilateral relations is not likely to come until Bouteflika passes from the political scene. FM Benaissa, while often an overly dramatic raconteur, has remarked to us "it will take a generation" for any real progress to take place, as not only Bouteflika but the people around him move off the political stage. The image of the King returning empty-handed from Algiers in April ("like a beggar," King Mohammed told Senator Lugar), when the GOM believes it has made all of the gestures to Algeria, is something the Moroccans will aggressively seek to avoid repeating.

The Border

[3](#). (C) Of critical importance to the Moroccans is the re-opening of the border with Algeria, a point re-emphasized by FM Benaissa in his September 21 meeting with U/S Burns. In Moroccan eyes, this is probably the most significant step the Algerians could take to demonstrate serious engagement with Morocco. The Moroccan senior leadership continues to complain, as the King did with Senator Lugar (ref A) that the Algerians are constantly shifting the goalposts on what they need to re-open the border. But there is no question that opening the border is not only a symbolic step forward but is firmly in US interests and facilitates opportunities for exchanges that can bolster ties in a myriad of ways.

[4](#). (C) For the most part, the Moroccans see Larbi Belkheir's appointment as Algerian Ambassador to Morocco as a positive sign. The King mentioned Belkheir several times in his meeting with Senator Lugar (Ref B) as a possible discreet channel between Morocco and Algeria, though he complained that the Algerians had never followed up to allow a back channel to exist. Nevertheless, we concur with Embassy Algiers' assessment that this designation represents a step forward.

Coordination with the Europeans

[5](#). (C) We see opportunities for greater coordination between the US and key European players -- especially the Spanish and French -- on Morocco-Algeria relations and the Western Sahara. We believe our message to the Europeans during UNGA -- join us in pushing for Algerian-Moroccan rapprochement -- is the right one.

The Autonomy Plan

16. (C) The other key piece of the equation is pushing the GOM to produce a credible autonomy plan -- one that goes beyond what the GOM offered PRSG Baker in late 2003. We believe that a central message from PRSG Van Walsum to the Moroccans, as he takes up his mandate, is to press the GOM for an expansion of their previous concept of autonomy. The Moroccans have intimated on many occasions that they are looking at a variety of autonomy models, but they have yet to produce anything concrete. Since there appears to be substantial consensus within the USG and elsewhere that autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the best political solution to the Western Sahara conflict, the international community needs to force Morocco's hand to produce a credible plan that can serve as the basis for negotiations.

17. (C) Thus we believe the preparation of a credible Moroccan autonomy plan -- recognizing that the GOM will not do so seriously until there is an improved climate of trust with Algeria -- should move to the center of our efforts on the Western Sahara. The GOM does not want to be seen to be negotiating autonomy with itself and is unlikely to expand on its autonomy proposal without strong pressure or incentives. We see little value in PRSG Van Walsum, for example, spending a lot of time "taking the temperature" of the parties; Alvaro De Soto did that for a year. While Van Walsum -- and we in conjunction with our European friends -- press Morocco to "stretch its thinking" on autonomy, the PRSG should be pressing the Algerians and the Polisario for ideas on how to meet their needs on self-determination short of a full-scale return to the Baker Plan.

A Census

18. (C) One way to incentivize the Moroccans on the autonomy issue is to redouble our efforts to press for a census in the Tindouf camps. At Department request (Ref C), Embassy Algiers raised this issue with the GOA and the Polisario in May. The Polisario is on record (Ref D) as committing to provide full cooperation "in any effort to count the refugees," though Polisario "Ambassador" Beisat said the census was the sole responsibility of Algeria. We should revitalize this effort, building on the Polisario's stated commitment -- both to gain a more accurate picture of the dimensions of Polisario political authority and support, and to ensure accountability of US funds dedicated to support the refugee population. As part of the effort, we can call on the Moroccans to provide solid evidence of their long-standing claims that international food aid is being sold on the market to line Polisario pockets. Now is the time for a serious international effort to pursue this.

Other Initiatives

19. (C) As we have reported in the past (ref E), there are other concrete steps we should encourage the two sides to take, some of which are areas that offer potential for joint action with the Europeans:

- encourage greater Algeria-Morocco military to military engagement, including direct communication on issues concerning the border, terrorism, and illegal immigration. The US-Morocco-Algeria naval exercises in June-July in the Mediterranean were a small but significant step forward in this regard.

- continue to press for the resumption of the confidence-building measures in the Western Sahara, which the US has committed funding for.

- actively encourage the two countries, through the bilateral commissions, to develop joint strategies for common concerns, especially illegal migration and human trafficking.

- promote further exchanges between business representatives from both sides, building on the September 20-22 OPIC regional investment conference in Marrakech. We believe significant increases in investment activity from the US and EU will result if the Morocco-Algeria border is re-opened.